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ABSTRACT

The expectations of parents of students with disabilities who transferred schools through an open enrollment option were examined in this qualitative study. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents of 18 children and adolescents who transferred their child through Minnesota's open enrollment law. Interviews addressed: the student's history of special education, reasons for transfer, delineation of student needs, parental expectations of child's school, parental expectations of child's teacher, implementation of the open enrollment option, student change after the transfer, and parental satisfaction. Results indicated that parents transferred their child only after careful deliberation and for well-conceived reasons. The needs discussed most often by parents centered on accommodation and adaptation in their child's program. Other areas emphasized by parents included personal/social adjustment, the need for a warm supportive environment, and home-school communication. (Contains 16 references.) (DB)

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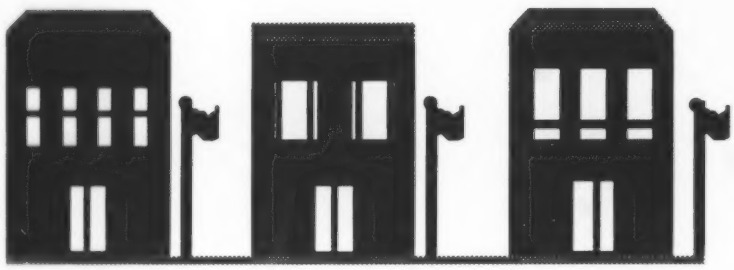
Research Report No. 15



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

Cheryl M. Lange, James E. Ysseldyke, Matthew Lau, Camilla Lehr

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School Choice and Students with Disabilities: Parent Perspectives and Expectations

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University of Minnesota

June, 1995

Abstract

School choice is an educational reform that is being implemented across the country. Students, including students with disabilities, are opting out of their resident schools to enroll in schools of choice. The reasons for the transfers are important to understand as school psychologists take a more active role in school reform issues. In this paper, the expectations of parents of students with disabilities who have transferred schools through one popular option, open enrollment, are examined. Parents' understanding of their child's educational needs in relationship to their expectations of the schools and school personnel are discussed. Recommendations for dealing with school choice issues are included for school personnel confronting a market-driven educational system.

The development of this article was supported in part by a Cooperative Agreement (H023C00004) between the University of Minnesota and the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Points of view or opinions expressed in the article are not necessarily those of the Department or Offices within it.

School Choice and Students with Disabilities: Parent Perspectives and Expectations

What do parents expect of their children's teachers, schools, and school system? This is a relevant question for school psychologists, teachers and administrators to consider as states develop public school choice programs that allow parents to choose their child's school or school district. School choice options vary state by state, but all provide more opportunity for parents to choose the school or school district they want their child to attend. Inherent in the theoretical framework underpinning school choice as an educational reform is the idea that parents have an expectation of what schools can or should provide for their children. How well schools are meeting these expectations is central to public school choice being a catalyst for change. School psychologists can play an integral role in this process by providing assistance to both school personnel and families as they struggle with school choice issues.

Often the debate surrounding school choice centers on outcomes for schools and students when school choice options are implemented. Proponents of public school choice contend that the availability of school choice options will move the educational system to be more competitive; thereby improving programs and services for students (Nathan, 1989; Raywid, 1989; Chubb & Moe, 1991). Opponents argue that school choice programs will be accessed by a limited number of families and will not move the system to change (Fowler-Finn, 1994; Hayes, 1992; Kozol, 1992; Marcoulides & Heck, 1990; McCollum & Walker, 1992; Molnar, 1992; Bastian, 1990). While these arguments are often the center of the school choice debate, the motivation behind parents' school choice decisions and their actual expectations are also important to consider. If schools and school districts are going to respond to the needs of students and provide programs and services that will retain and attract students through school choice options, it is imperative that the expectations of parents be well documented. When school psychologists are aware of parents' expectations they may play a valuable role assisting parents and school districts through the choice process. Their input is particularly important

when students with special needs contemplate transferring schools through school choice options.

Parents of students with disabilities are included in the group who are "voting with their feet" by transferring their children to nonresident schools or school districts through school choice options. In Minnesota, a state with some of the most comprehensive school choice legislation in the country, students with disabilities are active participants in school choice options. During the 1993-1994 school year approximately 10% of the over 15,000 students transferring to another school district through open enrollment or interdistrict choice were students with disabilities. Open enrollment allows parents to transfer their child to any school district in the state as long as there is space available and the transfer will not bring the district into noncompliance with desegregation rules.

A 1990 survey of educators involved in another popular Minnesota option, High School Graduation Incentives, found that over 19% of the participants were students with disabilities (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). This option allows students who are at-risk of academic failure, dropouts, pregnant, or custodial parents an opportunity to attend one of the over 140 alternative schools or any traditional high school. Even Minnesota's postsecondary enrollment options program that allows juniors and seniors to apply for enrollment in the state's public and private postsecondary institutions for high school and college credit has a large number of students with disabilities accessing the option (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1993).

Many parents of students with disabilities are opting for a different school or school district for their child. Why do parents decide to transfer their children with disabilities? A survey conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota's Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities Project reveals some noteworthy results (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney; 1994). Parents of students with disabilities who had transferred their child through Minnesota's open enrollment law in the 1990-1991 school year were asked their reasons for doing so. The four most frequently reported reasons were: (1) My child's special education needs are better met at the chosen school (64%); (2) Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more

personal attention (41%); (3) We were unhappy with our former school district (40%); and (4) Special education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress (38%).

Special education services appear to play an integral role in the transfer of students with disabilities. Yet, there are more questions than answers when reviewing parents reasons for transfer. What kind of needs are better met at the new school? Can parents articulate these needs? What are the expectations of parents who give these reasons for transferring their child to a new school? What kind of personal attention is desired? Why were parents dissatisfied with the former school? How can teachers keep parents more informed of their child's progress?

To answer these and other questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of parents from the original group of survey respondents. The intent of the interviews was to understand how parents define their child's needs, to delineate the expectations they had for their child's school and teacher, and to understand how the resident district had failed to meet their expectations. In this article, we present the results of these in-depth interviews.

As more and more reform measures are being implemented in schools and school districts around the country, school psychologists will be called upon to provide expertise in issues relating to reform. Davison (1994) articulates the changing role of the school psychologist when she includes educational reform as one of the current issues for school psychology. The insights learned in this qualitative study can be used by school psychologists to help teachers and administrators focus on the expectations of parents of students with disabilities. In addition, an understanding of parental expectations and their impact on school choice can be used to guide policy and practice.

Method

Participants

Parents of 18 children and adolescents with disabilities who transferred their child through Minnesota's open enrollment law were interviewed for this study. Participants were

selected from a larger group of parents who had a child with a disability and had completed a survey investigating reasons for participating in the open enrollment option (Ysseldyke, Lange, Gorney, 1994). Additional criteria for participation included a response on the survey indicating that they had transferred their child due to one of the following most frequently cited reasons for transfer.

- My child's special education needs are better met at the chosen school (64%).
- Teachers at the school can give my child more personal attention (41%).
- We were unhappy with our former school district (40%).
- Special education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress (38%).
- The chosen school gave my child a fresh start (36%).

Parents who met these criteria were further stratified by residential location (urban/residential) and their child's grade level (kindergarten through grade six/grade six through grade twelve). Parents of students who fit the criteria were then randomly selected and asked to participate in an interview. Twenty-two parents agreed to participate in the study. Parents of eighteen students were interviewed by one research assistant and the remaining four by another. Only the results from the 18 interviews conducted by the same research assistant are included in this analysis due to difficulties in merging the data gathered by two interviewers. Of these 18 students, eleven had transferred during the 1990-1991 school year. The remaining students transferred during 1991-1992 (n = 1) and 1992-1993 (n = 6). The educational and income levels of the parents interviewed varied widely. Demographic information about the parents and their children are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information About the Interview Participants and Their Children Who Transferred

	n	%
Student Gender:		
Female	8	44
Male	10	56
Student Grade level (1992-93 school year):		
1-3	6	33
4-6	3	17
7-9	2	11
10-12	7	39
Residential Location:		
Metropolitan	9	50
Rural	9	50
Parental Education Level:		
Father		
less than high school	1	6
high school	3	17
some college	6	33
four years of college	4	22
more than four years of college	3	17
missing data	1	6
Mother		
less than high school	0	0
high school	5	28
some college	6	33
four years of college	3	17
more than four years of college	3	17
missing data	1	6

Table 1, continued.

Demographic Information About the Interview Participants and Their Children Who Transferred

	n	%
Family Income:		
less than 10,000	0	0
10,000-30,000	6	34
30,000-75,000	8	45
more than 75,000	2	11
missing data	2	11

Instrumentation

An interview was developed to more closely examine findings from surveys conducted by Ysseldyke et al. Researchers were especially interested in information from parents that expanded upon the most frequently cited reasons for student transfer. For example, responses from the survey indicated that parents felt their child's needs could be better met at the nonresident school. In order to gather more specific information about this issue, parents were asked specifically to describe the needs of their child. Additional topics (which followed directly from the survey) that were addressed during the interview are listed below.

1. Student's history of special education.
2. Reasons for transfer.
3. Delineation of student needs.
4. Parental expectations of child's school.
5. Parental expectations of child's teacher.
6. Implementation of the open enrollment option.
7. Student change after the transfer.
8. Satisfaction.

The majority of the interview consisted of open-ended questions with discussion facilitated using standard prompts. In addition, eight Likert scale items were also included to measure parents' satisfaction with their chosen school district and to determine whether transportation was problematic. All interviews were tape recorded with consent of the respondents. A twenty dollar gratuity was offered to parents as compensation for participation.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, responses were analyzed for descriptive and qualitative information. Descriptive information included the students' history of special education, reasons for transfer, changes to student behavior after transfer, and open enrollment implementation issues. Ratings from the eight Likert scale items were analyzed to determine the level of parental satisfaction with the chosen schools and to determine whether transportation was a problem. Parental descriptions of student needs and expectations of their child's school and teachers were analyzed qualitatively. Tapes were transcribed and content was examined for common themes.

Eight educational outcome domains developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Gilman; 1993) were used as parameters to classify answers in response to questions about student needs and parental expectations of their child's school. These domains were initially created to identify important educational outcomes desired for students. They provided the framework for classifying students' needs in this study. The eight outcome domains include: Presence and Participation, Accommodation and Adaptation, Physical Health, Responsibility and Independence, Contribution and Citizenship, Academic and Functional Literacy, Personal and Social Adjustment , and Satisfaction. Definitions of these domains are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Definitions of the Domains

Domains Developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes	Definition
Presence & Participation	The extent to which an individual is present in a particular setting and the extent to which meaningful participation occurs.
Accommodation & Adaptation	Modifications that must be made for individuals to achieve outcomes.
Physical Health	The extent to which the individual demonstrates healthy behavior, attitudes, and knowledge related to physical well-being.
Responsibility & Independence	The extent to which the individual's behavior effects the ability to function independently and assume responsibility for oneself.
Contribution & Citizenship	The ways in which or extent to which an individual gives something back to society or participates as a citizen in society.
Academic & Functional Literacy	The use of information to function in society, to achieve goals, and to develop knowledge.
Personal & Social Adjustment	The extent to which the individual demonstrates socially acceptable and healthy behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge regarding mental well being.
Satisfaction	Extent to which a favorable attitude is held toward education.
Supportive Environment[a,b]	A positive environment which promotes successful experiences through the use of encouragement, compliments, and respect.
Challenge & Potential[a,b]	The extent to which an individual is challenged to reach his or her highest academic, social, emotional, and intellectual ability.
Communication[b,c]	The extent to which communication exists between teachers and parents for information exchange regarding the student.
Personal Characteristics[c]	General and specific personality traits, characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of teachers in their relationships with students, parents, and colleagues.
Accountability & Instructional Skills[c]	An obligation of teachers to build and maintain skills and abilities which foster, promote, and stimulate learning.
Management Skills[c]	The extent to which teachers have the skills and abilities necessary to maintain discipline and an organized classroom which promotes learning.

a = Emerging domain for delineation of student needs.
b = Emerging domain for expectations of child's school.
c = Domains for expectations of child's teacher.

Two researchers coded each of the responses independently placing statements into the NCEO domains. Responses were also examined for themes that did not fit the predetermined domains and new ones were developed as needed. After the independent coding was completed, any differences were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. For purposes of data analysis, each interview was considered to have one parental unit (although more than one parent may have provided the responses during a given interview).

Results

Student History of Special Education

All parents indicated that their child had special needs which required individual educational intervention. More than half of the students (56%) had received special education services from an early age. The special needs categories for students in this sample as designated before transfer and after transfer to the nonresident school are listed in Table 3. It is interesting to note that identification of the disability condition, or the need for service changed in some cases after transferring to the chosen school. Specifically, this occurred in four cases. In one case, the student had been assessed three times by the resident district at the request of his parents. Each time, he did not qualify to receive special education service. When assessed by the nonresident district shortly after transferring, he qualified to receive learning disability services in the area of written expression. In another case, a student received educational interventions at the resident school to deal with an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and then proceeded to receive service from the gifted program in the nonresident school. In the third case, services for a student initially identified as needing physical therapy at the resident school were dropped at the nonresident school. After assessment, the student began receiving services for a learning disability. The fourth student received no service at the resident school, but began to receive speech therapy and intervention in the area of reading after a hearing impairment was identified at the nonresident school.

Table 3

Students' Special Needs Category*

	Before Transfer		After Transfer	
	n	%	n	%
Attention Deficit	3	17	2	11
Emotional/Behavioral Disability	1	6	1	6
Gifted	1	6	3	17
Hearing Impaired	1	6	2	11
Learning Disability	9	50	11	61
Mental Retardation	4	22	4	22
Physical Disability	3	17	2	11
Speech	0	0	1	6

* A student may have more than one special need category.

Reasons For Transfer

Responses obtained on the survey developed by Ysseldyke et al.. indicated that parents transferred their children for various reasons. One of the most frequently cited reasons for transfer was dissatisfaction with the resident school (40%). To more clearly define parents' dissatisfaction and how it related to the transfer, parents were asked whether there was a turning point or particular incident that brought about the transfer decision. The decision to transfer in the majority of cases resulted from an escalation of long-standing differences with no acceptable resolution. Half (N = 9) of the parents reported that they had strong disagreements with school staff members about the treatment and education of their children at the resident school.

Disagreements that precipitated transfers were in four areas. Lack of parental notification, communication and overall respect was cited by four parents as the impetus for transfer. Some parents (n = 3) were concerned that educational treatment at the resident school was hurting their child's self-esteem. Third, philosophies on inclusion (n = 2) were a source of disagreement. Finally, one set of parents (n = 1) felt that the resident school was not providing a quality education for their child and wanted to see more improvement (given their child's needs).

Other reasons that brought about the change in schools were related to resources and opportunities available in the nonresident school. For example, parents transferred their children because they desired a bigger school, a smaller school, or a school that was accessible given their child's physical needs. For three families; work schedules, day care, and having all their children attend the same school dictated the decision to transfer. Examples of content from statements that parents made in regard to the transfer decision are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Sample Content from Statements Regarding Reasons for the Transfer Decision

Disagreements	Resources and Opportunities
• Lack of progress • Low expectations for student • School staff did not respond to new information regarding student's needs • Mainstreamed without support. • Did not mainstream • Educational program precipitating low self-esteem • Lack of communication with parent • Breach of confidentiality • Staff disrespectful of parent	• Special education service contracted through non-resident school. • Hour-long bus ride to resident school. • Building not handicapped accessible. • Smaller size of non-resident school desirable. • Want all children in family to attend same school.

Delineation of Student Needs

Responses obtained from the prior survey indicated that parents felt their child's needs could be better met at the nonresident school. In order to gather more specific information about this issue, parents were asked to describe the most important needs of their child. NCEO outcome domains were used as parameters to categorize responses.

Of the eight domains developed by NCEO, two are considered to be part of the educational process to some degree, rather than true outcome domains. "Presence and Participation" and "Accommodation and Adaptation" are generally thought of as mediating variables. However, there is consensus that these still need to be measured and they are generally listed as two of the eight major outcome domains. Two additional process oriented

domains emerged during analysis of the transcripts for categorization of student needs. Oftentimes, parents stated that their child's needs included a positive environment where they could experience compliments, warmth and encouragement. This domain was identified as "Supportive Environment" and is defined in Table 2. Second, parents' responses frequently focused on their child's needs as maximizing their potential, or being challenged to reach their highest ability in academic, social, emotional or intellectual development. This domain was identified as "Challenge and Potential" and is defined in Table 2.

Analysis of the transcripts yielded 142 unduplicated need statements in response to this particular topic of inquiry. The number of need statements within each of the 10 domains ranged from 2 to 44. The number and percentage of overall statements per domain are listed in Table 5. The five domains that were most frequently referred to by parents (via statements that were made) included Personal and Social Adjustment, Accommodation and Adaptation, Responsibility and Independence, Academic and Functional Literacy, and Supportive Environment. The number and percentages of parents who mentioned a particular domain are listed in Table 5. Samples of parent responses for each domain are also listed.

Table 5

Student's Needs By Domains and Samples of Parent Responses

Domains	Parents Referring to Domain (Total n = 18)		Statements per Domain (Total n = 142)	
	n	%	n	%
Presence & Participation • encouragement to stay in school • assistance to get up in the morning • encouragement to go to school	3	17	3	2
Physical Health • physical activities and opportunities • avoid artificial coloring, flavor, and preservatives • help with asthma, weight control, coordination	6	33	7	5
Contribution and Citizenship • become a productive citizen	3	17	4	3

Table 5, continued.

Student's Needs By Domains and Samples of Parent Responses

Domains	Parents Referring to Domain (Total n = 18)		Statements per Domain (Total n = 142)	
Personal & Social Adjustment • learn how to cooperate with others • learn to relate to similarly aged peers • learn how to deal with frustration • become more involved in school/social activities • become more self-confident, see self in a positive manner	14	78	27	19
Accommodation & Adaptation • repetition of material • monitor hearing, hearing aids • hands-on learning, active approach • adaptation and modification of testing • flexibility and tolerance of differences • more time to complete tasks	14	78	44	31
Responsibility and Independence • allow opportunities for trying • emphasis on vocational exploration and training • learn independence and self-discipline • decrease dependence on aid	8	44	15	11
Academic & Functional Literacy • solid academic training in math, reading, spelling, science, and language • learn how to express self better • opportunities for music, acting, computer, construction, and art • to improve study skills • positives, warmth, compliments, encouragements • choices and opportunities • high expectations • positive experiences, success • support for his/her interests	12	67	19	13
Satisfaction • dissatisfied with philosophy emphasizing reward system • too much emphasis on sports	2	11	2	1
Supportive Environment` • positives, warmth, compliments, encouragements • choices and opportunities • high expectations • positive experiences, success • support for his/her interests	11	61	18	13
Challenge & Potential • provide academic challenges • engage her mind in challenging activities	3	17	3	2

Parental Expectations of Child's School

Responses obtained from the Open Enrollment Survey (Ysseldyke et. al.; Ysseldyke, Lange, Delaney, & Lau; 1993) indicated that parents thought that resident schools were not meeting their expectations. Therefore, questions were developed asking: What expectations do you have of your child's school system? What should they be providing for your child? The statements generated by the parents were again coded and categorized according to the eight predetermined NCEO domains. Again, the domains of Supportive Environment and Challenge and Potential emerged. In addition, responses showed that parents expected the school staff to keep them informed about their child's experiences at school and that the school would listen to input from parents. These statements were categorized under a new domain that was identified as "Communication" which is defined in Table 2.

Analyses of the transcript yielded 119 unduplicated statements about school expectations. The number of statements within each of the 11 domains ranged from zero to 28. The domains of Responsibility and Independence, Academic and Functional Literacy, and Supportive Environment included the highest numbers of statements about school expectations, as well as being most frequently mentioned (via need statements) by parents. The percentages of parents who referred to a particular domain and the percentage of statements for each domain are listed in Table 6. A sample of parent responses are also included for each domain.

Parental Expectations of Child's Teacher

Responses from the 1992 Open Enrollment Survey suggested that transfer decisions were often influenced by issues that were teacher-centered. In order to better understand parents' perceptions, they were asked: What are your expectations of your child's teacher? Ninety five unduplicated statements on teacher expectations were identified. These statements were categorized into four domains: Personal Characteristics, Accountability and Instructional Skills, Management Skills, and Communication. Definitions are provided in Table 2. The number of statements within each of the four domains ranged from nine to 38. Nearly all parents made

comments about expectations of the teacher that fell under the domains of Personal Characteristics and Accountability and Instructional Skills. Percentages of parents referring to a particular domain and the percentage of statements for each domain are listed in Table 7. Sample responses are also listed.

Table 6

Expectations of Child's School by Domains and Samples of Parent Responses

Domains	Parents Referring to Domain (Total n = 18)		Statements per Domain (Total n = 142)	
	n	%	n	%
Presence & Participation	0	0	0	0
Physical Health • provide basic physical education needs	1	6	1	1
Contribution & Citizenship • prepare student to become a productive citizen • provide instruction about civics and government • connect with the community • develop critical thinking skills related to government and citizenship	8	44	13	11
Personal & Social Adjustment • provide opportunities for students and teachers to interact in extracurricular and academic activities • teach tolerance, patience, respect towards others • teach respect for oneself • develop an awareness of events around the world and an understanding of other cultures • teach and promote positive self-esteem in all students	10	55	11	9
Accommodation & Adaptation • present at student's level of understanding • provide mainstreaming opportunities • provide flexibility in group size • provide appropriate discipline • allow choice and work with the child's interests rather than the school curriculum • take into account differences in learning styles, behaviors, abilities, ethnicity	3	17	6	5
Responsibility & Independence • help student determine and prepare for future career or job • prepare student to be self-sufficient • focus on basic life skills (e.g., checkbook) • teach critical thinking skills to facilitate independent choices, decisions	9	50	17	14

Table 6, continued.

Expectations of Child's School by Domains and Samples of Parent Responses

Domains	Parents Referring to Domain (Total n = 18)		Statements per Domain (Total n = 142)	
Academic & Functional Literacy • teach basic academic skills (e.g., math, science, social studies, written languages, verbal expression) • teach computer skills, environmental issues • prepare student to be a lifelong learner • relate instruction and knowledge to real life experiences • provide a wide variety of learning experiences	12	67	23	19
Satisfaction • have all staff involved with the student at the IEP conference • listen to and acknowledge parental input • provide positive, safe, respectful environment • be professional, respect confidentiality • de-emphasize the importance of sports • allow freedom to practice religion in school	5	28	6	5
Supportive Environment • to consider the whole child • capitalize on strengths • provide positive atmosphere for learning • provide assistance when necessary • support student's choices and interests	14	78	28	24
Communication • communicate with parents • maintain close contact with parents • keep parents informed regarding child's day • listen to an respect parental input	8	44	9	8
Challenge and Potential • make the most of student's available ability • allow and facilitate student to reach his/her potential • maximize the student's capabilities	4	22	5	4

Although the domain of Communication was not one of the most frequently cited domains, it carried moderate weight on both the school and the teacher expectations sections. Therefore, communication between school and parents appeared to be an important concern for parents. Examination of the transcripts resulted in the emergence of two important themes regarding communication. First, parents reported that they wanted to be informed early on if any problems were developing at school. Second, parents noted that they wanted to work with

teachers in their child's educational program and have their opinions and knowledge acknowledged.

Table 7

Expectations of Child's Teacher by Domains and Samples of Parent Responses

Domains	Parents Referring to Domain (Total n = 18)		Statements per Domain (Total n = 142)	
	n	%	n	%
Personal Characteristics • show an interest in the child • be respectful towards parent and students • enjoy teaching • warm, caring, supportive, patient, good listener • organized, neat and clean • act in a professional manner	17	94	38	40
Accountability & Instructional Skills • motivate students to learn • recognize students' needs and individualize instruction • try different strategies to facilitate learning • create a positive environment for learning • provide help as needed • evaluate their instructional effectiveness • maintain knowledge base and have a solid educational background • follow through to see that students complete what is expected	17	94	38	40
Management Skills set clear limits be fair in mediating disputes have authority and skills to manage students	8	44	9	9
Communication • inform parents of any problems immediately • consider parents as part of a team • respect parent input • maintain communication using notes, phone calls, mid-term notices	8	44	10	11

Implementation of the Open Enrollment Option

Source of Information. Parents can only use the open enrollment option if they know of its existence. Thus, parents were asked about their source of information about the open enrollment. Responses indicated that most parents learned about the option by talking to school personnel and relatives. Four parents reported that the process was "easy." A similar number of

parents (N = 5), complained that information was "not readily available" and the process was "hard." Almost all parents would advise anyone who was interested in open enrollment to get information from the chosen school or chosen school district.

Coercion. There was no evidence to support coercion between schools and the families who decided to make a school change. In only two cases did parents report that resident schools were uncooperative. Two other parents believed that the resident school districts were relieved when they were notified about the school change because parents perceived that the school had identified them as "trouble-makers."

Transportation. Responses suggested that getting transportation to and from the nonresident school was a challenging issue when using the open enrollment option. Parents were asked to rate whether or not transportation to the nonresident school was a problem for their family using a five point Likert scale item (1 = agree, 5 = disagree). Nearly half (47%, N = 17) agreed that transportation was indeed problematic. Over half (61%, N = 18) of the parents interviewed had to either arrange transportation or drive their children to and from school each day. Three families lived close to the border of their chosen school districts; therefore their children could walk a block or so to catch the bus. For another three families, a local school bus that was operated by a private contractor went across district lines to transport their children.

Student Change After The Transfer

Most parents (67%) cited at least one positive change in academic growth, social development, or self-esteem after transferring to the non resident school. Sample content from comments made by parents in each area are listed below:

Academic Growth

- higher grades
- vocabulary increased
- got his first "A"
- more challenges

Social Development

- more socially adept
- better peer relationships
- gets invited to birthday parties of regular education peers
- has more positive friends

Self-Esteem

- happier
- more confidence
- likes school better
- feels better about himself-used to come home crying

Satisfaction

Using a five point Likert scale (1 = agree and 5 = disagree), parents were asked to rate three statements that were related to parent satisfaction: (1) Transferring my child to the current school has been a positive experience for him/her, (2) I am satisfied with the current school, and (3) I am satisfied with the current special education program. Most parents, 89%, 72%, and 61%, respectively, were satisfied with their experiences and rated "agree" on each of the three statements. In fact, all but one parent agreed or somewhat agreed with all statements.

Discussion

Parents were very articulate in expressing their child's educational needs and the expectations they had for their child's teachers and schools. Contrary to the contention of school choice opponents, these parents had deliberated over their decision to transfer their child and had done so for well-conceived reasons. What does all of this tell us about parents' expectations of

the educational system? How can this information be used by school psychologists, educators, and administrators to evaluate the extent to which they are meeting parents' expectations?

The eight domains developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes provide an useful framework by which to discuss the needs and expectations. This model was developed by stakeholders around the country that included parents, teachers, policymakers, and advocates of students with disabilities. It's inclusiveness provides an excellent starting point for the discussion of needs and expectations.

While it might be expected that parents would most often discuss needs related to academic and functional literacy in reference to their child's educational needs, this was not the case. The needs discussed most often by parents centered on an area we often forget; accommodation and adaptation. Parents told us it wasn't good enough to provide the "program" for their child or to have the child involved in an inclusive setting. Their children also needed to have the program adapted or other accommodations provided so they could meet their potential. Academic programs, whether in the general classroom or a more segregated setting, could not stand alone. Educators needed to develop a means of delivering the material so that the children could meet the goals set forth by the parents and the school.

This is an interesting perspective that is often overlooked by schools and school districts. Often we believe that if the program is in place no further work is necessary. Yet, those who observe student growth in the areas of academics and functional literacy acknowledge that student achievement is accompanied by the appropriate accommodation and adaptations to the student's program. Parents reported their children needed both exposure to academic and functional education and the accommodations and adaptations necessary to access the programs.

Not surprising, parents also emphasized the need for growth in the areas of personal and social adjustment. Learning how to live and work with others was considered an important need to be fulfilled by the educational system. For many parents, having their child involved in an inclusive program was essential to meeting this need. They discussed the importance of having their child in a classroom where similar aged peers could model age appropriate behavior,

friendships with regular education students could be developed, and a sense of belonging could be fostered.

Although parents expressed the need for accommodation and adaptation in their children's programs, they also reported the importance of promoting responsibility and independence. Parents saw their child's needs as being multifaceted and changing. "One size fits all" will not work. As their children changed, the program needed to change with them.

Parents also spoke passionately of the need for their children to be educated in a warm, positive, and supportive environment. Support for the child's interests and experiences in the form of praise, encouragement, and high expectations were felt to be important. Parents desired a school that was supportive and placed value on their child, regardless of the presence of a disability or special need. As one parent expressed, "Maybe warmth or something makes a difference—warmth toward [my daughter]. That is the common denominator. I want a [teacher] to look at her and think she is going to succeed—believe in her."

Another parent put it this way, "[I expect the school] will maximize what [students] are capable of—whatever skills they have. Now to me that doesn't mean all A's. To me it means that if you have an ability for art, somebody will help you find out about that or if you are especially gifted in writing poetry [they will support you]."

Results from the earlier survey indicated that one reason parents left the resident school was because they were not kept informed of their child's progress. Home-school communication was discussed at several of the interviews as an area where parents expected more of the schools. Some parents were dissatisfied with the amount of information they received about their child's progress. Others did not feel their opinions were taken seriously by school personnel. In either case, communication was a central concern. One parent put it this way, "I think one thing that they need to do is keep close contact with the family so the family knows about the things that are going on at school and the school knows about the things that are going on at home. [They need to do this] so that they take the whole child into consideration and not just [their role] as students." Another parent expressed it this way, "Keep us informed. Don't wait until the last

minute and say, 'Oh, by the way, your son or daughter is really way behind and there is not enough time to really do anything about it, so too bad.' [When you consider] the student's self-esteem and the parent's self-esteem, that's overwhelming."

Expectations of teachers were similar to the expectations parents held for their child's school. They wanted the teacher to be caring and supportive of their child. They expected the teacher to act professionally and to consider their child's individual needs. In addition to supportive and engaging personal characteristics, they expected the teacher to be well-trained in child development and knowledgeable about the subject matter. Parents expected their child's teacher to be a competent teacher and good classroom manager. They expected the teacher to include them in decision making and keep them informed of their child's progress.

Parents' expectations of teachers and the schools appear reasonable. Providing a supportive environment to teach academic and functional information that will challenge students to meet their potential sounds like a mission statement to which any school could ascribe. Yet, these parents left schools because they did not feel these things were happening. How can school psychologists respond to these concerns? What does this mean for teachers and administrators?

School psychologists, teachers and administrators have to examine the mission of their programs in relationship to students with disabilities. They need to ask themselves the following questions. Does the kind of environment that is provided enable students with disabilities to reach their potential? Does the communication system that is in place build upon the existing concerns parents and teachers have for students? Are the parents of students with disabilities satisfied with their child's education? What changes need to be made in order to bring about parental and teacher satisfaction?

If, after evaluation, school personnel decide they have a successful program; they must consider how to let parents know about the policies and practices that are making a positive difference for students. With the advent of school choice and other reforms, parents' expectations for schools and teachers must be seriously considered by policymakers and

educators. It has always been important to communicate the positive policies and practices to parents and students. However, with the availability of parent and student choice it is even more important that teachers and educators get the word out.

The following recommendations are offered as suggestions, not only to those who face school choice issues; but to any educator who is concerned about meeting the needs of students and their families.

- Survey parents to determine how well your school is meeting parent expectations. Find out what they expect and what they want from the schools.
- Establish a communication system for all teachers so that parents of students with disabilities are kept informed of their child's progress and of the programs and services to which the children are being exposed. Parents want to know what is happening. Our research findings on open enrollment and parents of students with disabilities indicate that home-school communication efforts are central to transfer decisions. If they don't know what is happening, they may be making incorrect assumptions. Weekly assignment books, weekly newsletters, or weekly progress reports can aid in this task.
- Review the school's policies and practices in the area of accommodation and adaptation. Determine if all that should be done is being done in both the general education classes and the special education classes.
- If students are transferring in or out of your district due to school choice options, find out the reasons parents have made their decisions and communicate those reasons to all personnel.
- Evaluate the environment or climate of your school. Determine how supportive it is for students, parents, and teachers. Establish goals that will move the school to being one that will be viewed as supportive of all.
- In the age of inclusion, review with staff members the importance of challenging all students, regardless of disability status. Personnel often have not been trained or may not be sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities.

Parents of students with disabilities are using school choice options to find the desired school for their child. Parents who transfer their children with disabilities through open enrollment have articulated reasons for transfer that are tied to their child's needs and their expectations of the school and teacher. School psychologists are in a unique position to mediate placement issues by actively involving parents in the decisions that are made about their children's educational program. In addition, in an era of school choice, it is imperative that

school psychologists help educators understand the role they play in meeting parents' expectations. Through this understanding desired reforms may become reality and the value of school psychologists in affecting the changes become recognized.

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